Nazi medicine: "The perversion of the noblest profession"

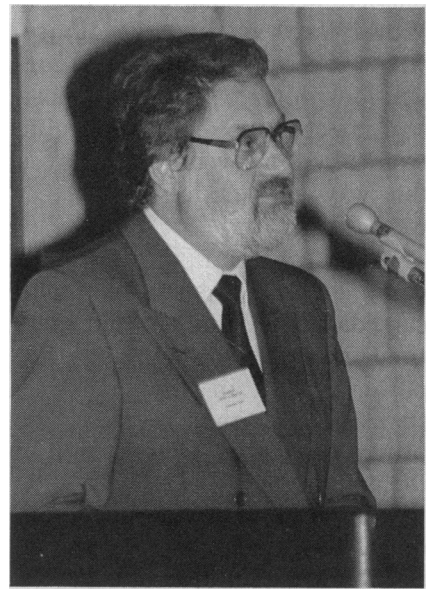
Michael OReilly

Nearly 50 years have passed since Germany's 1000-year Reich collapsed after only 12 years, but the horror of Adolf Hitler's short-lived nightmare still echo through the ages. Indeed, the subject was raised recently when American and German doctors asked Dr. Hans-Joachim Sewering of Germany, the president-elect of the World Medical Association, to withdraw from the position because of accusations that he had belonged to the *Schutzstaffel* (SS), the Nazi elite guard, before World War II. He was also accused of approving the transfer of a 14-year-old patient to a clinic that was known to have practised euthanasia under the Nazi regime. [*Associated Press* says Sewering denies that he knowingly sent the girl to her death. He also said that many Germans joined the SS before the war, without realizing what Hitler had planned. In January, Sewering announced that he was no longer a candidate for the post. More detailed information on the Sewering controversy will be presented in the next issue of *CMAJ* — Ed.]

There is little doubt that the atrocities associated with Nazi Germany continue to plague ethicists around the world. Only recently have these topics become a subject of open debate in the now reunified Germany: for decades, the issue was simply not mentioned.

Any discussion of the events that took place in Germany between 1933 to 1945 also involves a debate on the role German medicine played in them. How could a profession whose guiding oath proclaims the sanctity of life contribute to the events that came to light after the war? The German medical community has begun to study the issue and, through a travelling exhibition, this self-examination is being shared with the rest of the world.

The Value of the Human Being: Medicine in Germany 1918–1945, is a series of 35 2-m-high free-standing panels that tells a tale of death, murder and degradation on a previously unheard-of scale. The stark black-and-white images and graphic text describe how physicians used Hitler's victims — the Jews, homosexuals, dissidents and others who had been sent to concentration camps — to further their science. Experiments involving hypothermia, air pressure, poison gases and diseases such as hepatitis were conducted on these human lab specimens. The exhibit traces the origins of the "final solution" and the role German doctors played in it.



Kater: the medical profession went collectively astray

The travelling exhibition, which had previously been to Berlin, Boston and San Francisco, arrived at the University of Toronto for 2 weeks last fall. A symposium organized by the university's Centre for Bioethics and the Goethe Institute (Toronto) was held in conjunction with it. Scholars from Canada, the United States and Germany gathered to look at this shameful period of medical history.

"One is dealing with one of the darkest aspects of a dark age," explains Dr. Fritz Stern of Columbia University, New York. "We are talking about nothing less than the perversion of the noblest profession, the systematic violation of all that the white coat has ever stood for."

How did an entire profession get led so far astray? And if it happened once, could it ever happen again? To the latter question, Dr. Frederick Lowy, director of the U of T's Centre for Bioethics, answers "Yes." Today's medical

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advances, says Lowy, are placing doctors in positions of ethical conflict that are similar to conflicts faced by their German counterparts 50 years ago.

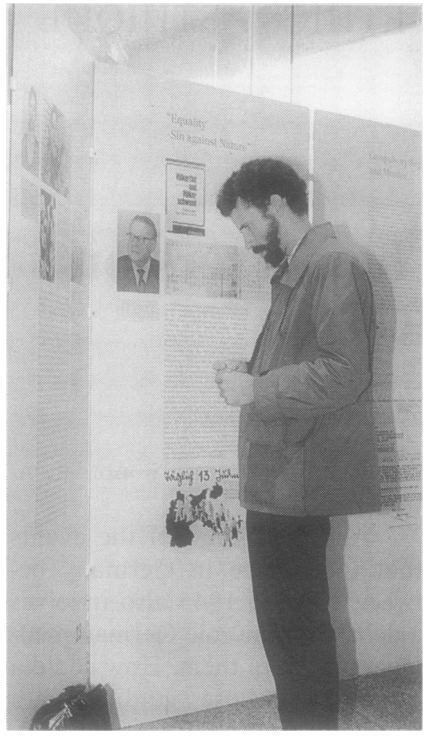
Genetic advances, biotechnology, prenatal testing and increasing pressure to become financial gatekeepers are forcing physicians into the driver's seat of medical ethics, a seat that was filled by German doctors during the Nazi years.

"It is important to remember that the Nazi doctors were just like all the rest of us," says Lowy. "They were not some different species. They were trapped by an ideology and a state, but what really turned them in the wrong direction was the disregard for the individual."

Lowy says that even though today's doctors face many of the same ethical questions German physicians did, this does not mean they are doomed to repeat the mistakes of the past. "I don't believe in the inevitability of sliding down the slippery slope," he says, "but we must first recognize that the slope is slippery."

The peril of ignoring these "slippery slopes" was illustrated by Dr. Eduard Seidler of the University of Freiburg, Germany. In his paper, "Ethical Implications of Weimar, Nazi and Postwar German Medicine", he showed how the perversions perpetrated by German doctors grew quite inconspicuously from a concern about the health of the German population.

Seidler: down a slippery slope



Medical student Wilfrid Ruby studies display

Germany's Weimar Republic (1919–1933), partly in reaction to massive losses experienced during World War I, instituted a country-wide, government-run illness-prevention program that had a positive effect on the nation's health. Ironically, however, it also paved the way for the atrocities that would follow.

The program introduced a comprehensive system of health care data collection. At the same time, it also forced a subtle but powerful shift in physicians' responsibilities: they became the primary overseers of the health of the population as a whole.

Paralleling these developments in Germany was a general rise in the exploration of eugenics. At the same time, medical and technologic advances were creating new possibilities for improving the human condition. According to Seidler, these factors, when combined with the worldwide economic collapse of the 1930s, produced a German powder keg that simply needed a flame. Adolf Hitler provided it.

The Weimar Republic's health care initiative sputtered under the weight of the Great Depression, and all its positive aspects were stripped away. What remained was a government-controlled health data collection system and a medical community more interested in the well-being of the population than the well-being of individual people. When combined with the Nazi ideology of racial purity, the mixture was able to ferment and produce medicine's darkest hour.

Professor Michael Kater of Toronto's York University picked up the story from there. In his paper, "Problems of German Medicine and Medical History Past and Present", Kater traced the stages of persecution in the Third Reich. Beginning in 1933 with the purge of non-Aryan doctors from the medical insurance system, the process quickly led to Nazi Germany's death camps. "Once [there], Jews became toys for the treacherous SS physicians," says Kater. It was in these camps that Hitler's "final solution" was executed. Jews, other non-Aryans and those with genetic or mental imperfections became guinea pigs for German doctors and researchers. At the Nuremberg trials that followed World War II, 23 doctors were tried for crimes against humanity. Kater maintains that the blame went far deeper than that.

"The medical community in Germany has not come to terms with the crimes of the past," he argues. "Those Nazi crimes that have been acknowledged were attributed to a few hundred deviants, not to a profession that collectively had gone astray."

The tale of a society and profession gone mad

What is the value of human life? Most people could not answer this question, but that was not the case in Germany 50 years ago. Under the National Socialists — the Nazis — Germany gave its answer, and the ramifications still haunt us today. The development and consequences of this answer are the topics explored in a travelling German exhibition, *The Value of the Human Being: Medicine in Germany 1918-1945.*

The exhibit's 35 panels were on display at the University of Toronto last fall. Each 2-m-high board displayed a page from the history of that time, beginning just after the defeat of Germany in World War I and concluding with a panel concerning the Nuremberg trials. The story that was told between those first and last panels was horrifying, the tale of a society and profession gone mad.

It illustrated a world in which medical scientists placed orders for human brains and ignored how the specimens were collected. And where non-Aryans and other "genetically inferior" people were eliminated in order to create a pure German stock.

Studying the panels from beginning to end was like taking a trip into progressive madness. Each panel, with its large black-and-white photos and neutral-toned text, moved the reader, step by step, toward the ultimate end: the "final solution." Perhaps the truly nightmarish thing was that there seemed to be logic behind each move.

Each step certainly made sense to German physicians practising at the time. After all, they were working for the good of the people. They were improving the strength of the German nation. How could this not be right?

It was not right.

The Value of the Human Being offered an illustration of what can happen when medicine loses sight of its main goal: treating individual patients. German medicine lost that goal, and replaced it with an overriding quest for knowledge. In that harsh light, people could be sacrificed for the good of the whole, especially if they were "inferior." As one of the judges at the Nuremberg trials put it: "It was only at the juncture of two developments that doctors became licensed murderers and publicly hired torturers: where the aggressiveness of their search for truth met the ideology of the dictatorship."

Contained within the exhibit's text was the story of the perversion of medicine, but it was the personal accounts that made it more than just another history text. There was the story of Emmi G., a schizophrenic patient. She was forcibly sterilized and then, during a later hospitalization, murdered with an overdose of sleeping pills.

There was also the tale of Julius Moses, a courageous Jewish physician who chose not to leave Germany but to stay and try to halt the country's moral slide. He was deported to a concentration camp, where he died of starvation.

This exhibit was not merely a study of the past: it was a warning for the present and future. When economics begins to dictate health care policy, when the practice of medicine stops being a human endeavour and becomes a technocratic one, when the power to affect the genetic future of the species becomes viable — these are all danger signs. The creators of this exhibit showed viewers what happens when these signs are ignored.

In his closing remarks during the symposium associated with the travelling exhibition, Dr. Rolf Winau of the Free University of Berlin may have described the issue best: "I think the only safeguard we can have has to be a kind of scepticism, particularly around our best intentions."

German medicine is beginning to look back in an attempt to find some answers. It is an important search, explains Lowy, not only for German doctors but also for physicians around the world. Today, when medical technology and scientific advances are expanding mankind's power to improve itself, it is vitally important the lessons from the past are not forgotten.

Stern put it this way: "There are things we can learn from the Nazi experience. There is a need for much greater vigilance to protect human and individual rights. We must establish legal and ethical criteria in the face of altogether new dangers and opportunities. There will always be those who attempt what might be called the Faustian bargain, to experiment and so on. How we restrain these people without restraining the scientific process is one of the many challenges we now face."■